

English First Peoples 12

Common Portrayals of Indigenous People

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Media have always shaped the public's perception of Indigenous people: the wise elder (*Little Big Man*); the princess (*Pocahontas*); the loyal sidekick (Tonto)—these images have become engrained in the consciousness of North Americans.

Hollywood's versions of "how the West was won" relied totally on the presence of Indigenous people, who were to be wiped out or reined in. The few Indigenous characters in film or TV were typically played by non-Indigenous actors such as Ricardo Montalban, Burt Reynolds and Raquel Welch – a practice that went on as recently as 2013's *The Lone Ranger*, which cast Johnny Depp as the title character's sidekick Tonto. Canadian Ojibway author Drew Hayden Taylor points out that this miscasting was a direct result of the perception that Indigenous nations had been consigned to history: "Everyone thought the Indians were all dead, so who else were they going to get?" ^[1]

Cree filmmaker Neil Diamond's award-winning documentary *Reel Injun* (2010) examined the portrayals of Indigenous people in Hollywood films. Through numerous interviews with producers like Clint Eastwood and extracts of relevant films, Diamond explores how media portrayals have influenced our understanding and misunderstanding of Indigenous people. The celebrities that appear in the documentary and talk about their experiences include Mohawk musician Robbie Robertson (*The Band*), filmmakers Jim Jarmusch (*Dead Man*) and Chris Eyre (*Phoenix, Arizona*) and acclaimed Indigenous actors Graham Greene (*Dances with Wolves*, *Thunderheart*), Wes Studi (*The Last of the Mohicans*, *Geronimo*), Adam Beach (*Phoenix, Arizona*; *Flags of our Fathers*) and Zacharias Kunuk (*Atanarjuat / The Fast Runner*).

Portrayals of Indigenous people as being primitive, violent and devious, or passive and submissive, are widespread in movies and TV programs and in literature ranging from books to comic strips. As award-winning Indigenous author Thomas King puts it in his book *The Inconvenient Indian*, it is only "in the last twenty years Indian actors have found roles that do not involve the nineteenth century, roles that don't require loincloths and full feather headdresses." ^[2]

1. According to Drew Hayden Taylor, why are Indigenous characters played by non-Indigenous actors?
2. List the two ways Indigenous people were generally portrayed in past media:

Romanticization

Indigenous people remain highly stereotyped in most mass media, in ways that are sometimes less remarked upon than stereotypes of other groups. One of the most common stereotyping traps is various forms of romanticization. We can find romanticization in the following images of Indigenous people that have dominated media for nearly a century:

The princess

This is the stereotype of a beautiful Indigenous woman who is sympathetic enough to the white man's quest to be lured away from her culture and community to marry into his culture and help further his mission to colonize her people. "The Indian princess is strictly a European concept," writes Indigenous scholar Joseph River Wind. "The nations of this country never had a concept of royalty. We do not have kings, queens or princesses."^[4] Nevertheless, the stereotype persists, most visibly in the continued popularity of the Disney film *Pocahontas*, which Anishinaabe writer Jesse Wenthe describes as "probably the most widely watched piece of entertainment of Indigenous peoples." Despite the fact that the historical Pocahontas "would have been a child when she met [English settler] John Smith... she's portrayed scantily clad for most of the film," which contributes to another aspect of the stereotype - "that Indigenous women are somehow sexually active or mature at a very young age."^[5]

The warrior

One of the most widely used stereotypes in cinematographic history, the "Indigenous warrior" is fierce and formidable and a threat to civilized society. Bare-chested and brandishing a war lance, this warrior is the epitome of the "savagery" that must be "courageously overcome" by "progressive elements" pushing West. A recent example is the character of Jacob Black in the *Twilight* books and series, a member of the Quileute people who, as a werewolf, represents the stereotype in a particularly literal way. The use of Indigenous men in the names and logos of sports teams plays on a stereotype of masculinity that is so extreme as to be literally inhuman: as Jesse Wenthe points out, "Indigenous people are the only humans that are cast as mascots and as team names."^[6]




The noble mystic

Elevated to a sphere of goodness unreachable by those living in contaminated non-Indigenous society, and usually possessing some spiritual connection to the land, the "noble mystic" communes in a cloud of mysticism and places no value on material possessions.^[8] A related stereotype is "the mystical all-knowing Indian with one foot in the astral plane, the other in a canoe ... they melt in and out of the bush almost as effortlessly as they speak metaphorical wisdoms."^[9]

3. Google and write down the definition of romanticize

4. How might romanticizing Indigenous people still be problematic?

5. Label the three romanticized images of Indigenous people. Briefly explain in your own words what the issue is with each stereotype.

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Stereotyping by omission and decentring

Most film depictions of Indigenous people are set in a 50-year period in the mid-19th century. Where are the stories of Indigenous people before the arrival of the European settlers, and where are the stories about Indigenous life today?

The article “Stereotyping Indians by Omission” notes that Indigenous people are “the only population to be portrayed far more often in historical context than as contemporary people.”^[12] Thomas King points out that this limits the available roles for Indigenous actors: “Most Indian actors wind up in historical roles. Provided they look Indian. That’s the catch. If you don’t look Indian, you don’t get historical Indian roles.”^[13]

Indigenous people are also often removed from a central role in narratives they appear in so that non-Indigenous characters can take centre stage. In this stereotype, Indigenous people may be portrayed sympathetically but require a non-Indigenous protagonist to save them or achieve their goals. (Additionally, this protagonist is often shown as becoming more accomplished at the Indigenous culture’s own skills and culture.) This stereotype dates back at least as far as the novel *The Last of the Mohicans*,

with more recent examples being *Dances with Wolves*, *Avatar* and *The Book of Boba Fett* (the latter two feature fictional alien species that are equated to Indigenous peoples in the narrative.)^[14]

Simplistic characterizations

The lack of character and personality afforded to Indigenous people by the media is another destructive force. Indigenous people are almost always cast in supporting roles or relegated to the background and are rarely allowed to speak or display their complexity and richness as human beings. Whatever character they do have tends to reveal itself only in terms of their interactions with non-Indigenous people. Rarely is an Indigenous character portrayed as having personal strengths and weaknesses or shown acting on their own values and judgements.

6. In your opinion, which is the worst: omission, decentring, or simplistic characterizations? Justify your choice.

The white saviour complex

A persistent and harmful trope in both film and literature is the “white saviour”—a non-Indigenous protagonist who enters an Indigenous community and becomes the hero by helping its people solve their problems, often using knowledge, tools, or wisdom from outside the culture. These stories tend to centre the non-Indigenous character’s journey of personal growth or redemption, rather than the realities and agency of Indigenous peoples themselves.

The white saviour narrative reinforces colonialist ideas by portraying Indigenous people as incapable of leading, healing, or defending themselves without outside intervention. This framing subtly suggests that Indigenous cultures lack the strength or sophistication to overcome adversity without external help, erasing Indigenous resistance, leadership, and resilience. Films such as *Dances with Wolves* and *The New World* place white characters in positions of saviourism, while Indigenous characters are either passive recipients of help or sacrificed to move the white character’s story forward. This type of portrayal distorts real histories and undermines present-day Indigenous voices, struggles, and leadership.

7. In your own words, what’s wrong with the “white saviour” trope?